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Nanay's Kusina or Carinderia? The Perceived Lack of Filipino Restaurants in American Dining

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**Nanay's Kusina or Carinderia? The Perceived Lack of Filipino Restaurants in
American Dining**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from
The College of William and Mary

by

Amanda L. Tira Andrei

Accepted for High Honors _____
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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April 27, 2010

**Nanay's Kusina or Carinderia?
The Perceived Lack of Filipino
Restaurants in American Dining**

Department of Anthropology
College of William & Mary
By Amanda L. Tira Andrei
2009-2010

*Dedicated to
Codin Andrei and Mercedes Tira Andrei*

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INTRODUCTION

Chef's Recommendation's

- 32) **Menudo** (Sauteed pork seasoned w/Garlic,onion,carrots,Garbanzos & potatoes) ... \$8.99
- 33) **Sizzling Sisig** (Filipino special comfort food) ... \$12.99
- 33) **K.I Dinuguan** (Chocolate Dark meat Sauteed w/ onion,garlic & Vinegar) ... \$11.99
- 34) **Papaitan** (Sauteed pork & beef stew in bile filipino Comfort food) ... \$12.99
- 35) **Adobong Baboy** (Pork cooked w/ vinegar ,garlic,onion,& bay leaves) ... \$8.99
- 36) **Adobong Manok** (Chicken cooked w/ vinegar ,onion,& bay leaves) ... \$8.99
- 37) **Adobong Combination** (chicken& pork w/ vinegar & bay leaves) ... \$9.99
- 38) **Crispy Pata** (deep fried seasoned pork hocks) **20 minutes waiting time** ... \$14.99

Such were the choices when I opened the menu at Karaoke Idol, one of the first Filipino restaurants I visited in the D.C. metro area. My two friends (and “food testers”) looked through the menu tentatively, asking me how to pronounce each dish and if it was good. In comparison to their hesitance, I was giddy to see Filipino dishes like *sisig* and *papaitan*.

“I didn’t even know they cooked these in America!” I exclaimed. I had just returned from spending six months in the Philippines, learning about these comfort foods and witnessing the pride Filipinos expressed when showing me dishes that used “unusual” ingredients such as bile or pig’s head. Other foods like *adobong manok* I knew well from my childhood when I watched my mother cook a huge pot of *adobo* to last us for a whole week. Still others I was curious to see prepared, such as the *menudo*—my mother had never used garbanzos. And some dishes I skipped completely, such as the *dinuguan*, because it did not please my personal palate. I did snicker at the description of “Chocolate Dark meat,” as *dinuguan* looks like thick chocolate pudding and is actually a stew of pig’s blood—surprise to the unwitting customer who chose that!

Filipino¹ cuisine is a contentious subject within the Filipino community. In an authoritative anthology of essays and illustrations assembled by Filipino gourmets, scholars, historians, and professors, The Culinary Culture of the Philippines opens with the question:

What makes Philippine cuisine Philippine? The question perhaps is a mild variant of that other, by now overwhelming, question: what makes a Filipino? (Mercado 1976, 9)

Defining this national cuisine is so contentious because it is intricately tied to defining Filipino national identity. Within the Philippines, the national cuisine is adapted by region, celebrated in fiestas, consumed with gusto, and categorized in a myriad of ways that parallel the way Filipinos categorize their own identity. The topic is overwhelming in its scope, and most Filipinos have an opinion of nearly every aspect of food, whether sold by a street vendor or by an *haute* restaurant, found in a cookbook, or prepared from a beloved family recipe passed down by word of mouth.

In this paper, I focus on Filipino restaurants in America, specifically in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. While growing up in Northern Virginia, I often heard my mother's friends ask each other, "Why are there no Filipino restaurants in the area?" By the time I was in high school, I had friends who would suggest having lunch at the new Vietnamese *pho* house or getting dinner at the new Thai restaurant. Occasionally they asked if there were any Filipino restaurants in the area, to which I would vaguely reply, "Not really. They're too far away or don't really taste that good." Filipino friends in college confirmed these assessments, and our experience of eating Filipino food was relegated to our families' cooking or Filipino American community picnics or events where the food was catered from these mysterious Filipino restaurants.

¹ I choose to use the term "Filipino" instead of "Philippine" because that was the most pragmatic term I heard Filipinos use when speaking of themselves and their restaurant. I believe other scholars use the term "Philippine" because it is not gendered.

Originally I believed the main cause of the “lack” of Filipino restaurants was food itself—perhaps it was not as exotic as Vietnamese or Thai food, or maybe Americans just could not stand to pick through hundreds of fish bones or to peel off the delightfully squishy pork belly fat. Surely this was a problem with mainstream American society: Filipino food was not appealing to Americans, and therefore Filipinos were discouraged from opening restaurants, because they found there was no market for their food. If only Americans were more accepting of Filipino cuisine, then there would be more restaurants!

Eventually I came to understand that the very nature of my question was skewed, and I placed too much emphasis on non-Filipinos as a source of explanation. How can there be a “lack” of restaurants if there are at least a dozen or so in the D.C. metro area? How can non-Filipinos perceive a “lack” if they do not like or even know about Filipino food? “Lack” implies an insufficiency or that there should be more restaurants than are already present. What makes Filipinos so deserving of having as many restaurants as, say, the Vietnamese community? Despite the convoluted nature of the term, I choose to keep the word “lack” in keeping with the word choice of the people I interviewed.

Complex issues of colonialism, diaspora, nostalgia, and authenticity surround the understanding of Filipino restaurants in D.C., making these establishments critical sites of study for the expression of ethnic identity in America. As I interviewed mostly Filipino restaurant owners and focused less on customers, I choose to focus on the Filipino American view of themselves, as opposed to white, American, or even “other” Asian views of Filipino restaurants. It is true that some Americans find Filipino food unappealing, and it is true that the number of Asian ethnic restaurants do not correspond to the Asian ethnic populations (the D.C. restaurants would then only have one percent Thai restaurants). It is also true that the concept of *bahala na* plays an important role in affecting Filipinos’ attitudes

towards money, time, business, pride, and the family.² Other factors to consider are how Filipinos compromise their food and its presentation and the effects on compromising and presenting their own identity, as well as Filipinos' ideas on Americans' taste preferences. However, these issues would require comparative data about other Asian communities or an in-depth study of a single term (*bahala na*), which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Instead, I am interested in why Filipino Americans say there are no Filipino restaurants, even as they might sit and eat in one of them. How are restaurants appropriate sites for the (counter) public demonstration of one's ethnicity? How are they compatible with Filipino ideas of "what makes a Filipino"? How are these restaurants accurate reflections of a diasporic community's experience in reconstructing home and differentiating themselves from mainstream America? Finally, what does the perceived lack of restaurants say about the Filipino's self-identity and sense of "pride"? What does "pride" entail for the Filipino?

While in the Philippines, I felt as if Filipinos were constantly looking for people, places, and objects in which to place their pride. For instance, there are few heroes in Philippine history, and the few heroes that exist are glorified to the extent that some have churches and cults (Ocampo, 2008). People in the Philippines (and some Filipinos in America) are quick to trace ancestry to Spanish or Chinese roots—most of the time as a way to indicate social prestige—but more often because it is difficult to define exactly who is a Filipino.³ Within this habitus is a continual search for definition and distinction, a way to

² *Bahala na* is translated in a variety of ways: "leave it up to God," "leave it up to fate," "whatever happens, happens," or simply "whatever." This is an attitude trait that Filipinos often bring up in explaining their culture and heritage and has been critiqued for being fatalist.

³ It would take a whole other paper to discuss why Filipinos are quick to indicate Spanish or Chinese heritage, but it is something I have noticed among my friends and among classmates. Somehow, having a Spanish or Chinese ancestor sets the "average" Filipino apart. Historically, the Spanish have been the dominant class in the Philippines, and the experience of Chinese Filipinos is one of a minority suppressed or rejected by the Spanish or other Filipinos. I also suspect that there are racial connotations that being Spanish or Chinese

say, “Here I am, as I am!” but more often than not, this comes out as, “Here are parts of me from more well-known places; jumbled together I will eventually emerge.” Thus, the struggle for a coherent national cuisine is a part of a struggle for a coherent national identity.

accounts for a lighter complexion and appearance, which is a the standard of beauty among Filipinos in the Philippines. Whatever the reason, saying that one’s ancestry is from another culture gives the person a type of rootedness and distinction, because it is easier to trace Spanish or Chinese heritage than the jumbled identity of “being Filipino.”

SOCIAL THEORY OF FOOD AND RESTAURANTS

The first ethnographies of restaurants appeared in the 1970s and 1980s (Berris, Sutton 2007, 5). In contrast, the role of food and foodways in different cultures has been of interest to anthropologists since at least the turn of the twentieth century (Counihan, Van Esterik 1997, 1). Claude Levi-Strauss's contributions on food, particularly the culinary triangle (1968), introduced ideas about the techniques of cooking and their relationships with private versus public settings. Mary Douglas furthered Levi-Strauss's arguments concerning the structural nature of food and its capacity as a symbol. No material object, especially food, is "without its conscious symbolic load" (1966, 124). Furthermore, Douglas notes that food has the power to "enliven the memory and link the present with the relevant past" (1996, 79), making it a potential source of nostalgia and contested memory.

Food has also been explored in the context of ethnicity and how it may be used as a tool for shaping identity. In his study of Jews in Denmark, Daniel Buckser explores how in an increasingly modernizing world with greater social and geographic mobility, individuals and groups use food as a metaphor for contesting ethnic identity (1999, 192). This example has parallels within the Filipino American community as well. As categorical lines blur due to interethnic marriage, immigration, and social mobility, "ethnic food traditions have begun to break down" (1999, 191) in Filipino, Jewish, and other "ethnic" communities. Instead of an ethnic network defining an individual, the individual may or may not choose to define himself as part of an ethnicity. "Being ethnic" presents the dilemma of being part of society, yet simultaneously separate and autonomous. Practices of ethnic groups, particularly pertaining to foodways, are not merely reinforcing group identity as much as they are theorizing and characterizing it.

The discussion of ethnicity in America usually involves discussion of mobility and diaspora. Arjun Appadurai's analysis of Indian cookbooks creating a national cuisine (1988) is relevant to my understanding of Filipino cuisine in America. As a "postindustrial, postcolonial process" (1988, 5), the construction of a coherent national Indian cuisine began through cookbooks often produced in the West and then republished in India (1988, 15). This implies that a national cuisine is primarily created because of nostalgia of displaced peoples. The more mobile people become, the more attached they become to their former places. As geographic distance stretches their sense of rootedness, they search for ways to hold onto notions of home and comfort.

But the formation of a national cuisine subverts regionalism within the nation in question. Appadurai explains, "But the idea of a menu is clearly a way to organize the proliferation of specialized regional and ethnic traditions and to subordinate them to the counterweight of an Indian culinary idiom" (1988:20). Traditional presentation and preparation of regional ethnic foods within that nation lose their regionalism and ethnicity as they are glossed over in order to present a unified national cuisine. For instance, on the menu of *Little Quiapo*, a more upscale restaurant in Arlington, Virginia, the menu is more or less divided into traditional western concepts of a menu: soup, appetizer, noodles, rice, beef/pork/chicken, seafoods and vegetables, side orders, desserts, and beverages. Yet grouped in the appetizers are *chicharon bulaklak*, a common street food of deep fried pork fat sold for a few pesos in the Philippines, and *lumpia*, a finger food served at fiestas and special occasions. Within the Philippines, these foods are found in different spaces and contexts, but in an American restaurant, they become categorized as the same type of food item. Also within the seafood and vegetable category, the bitter Ilocano vegetable medley known as *pinakbet* and the spicy, coconut cream Bicolano dish *Bicol Express* are grouped together based

on ingredients, not necessarily regional areas. Different Filipino ethnic foods lose their occasion-marked statuses and regional identity from the Philippines in order to appear coherent and classifiable on an American menu. Ethnic cuisine has to adapt to nationalism, and in similar ways, so does an ethnic group adapt to a mainstream society.

How do Filipinos structure this menu and adapt their cuisine (and identity) to American structures? One interpretation can be made through the theory of habitus as outlined by Bourdieu. Bourdieu defines habitus as “both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification... of these practices” (1987, 170). It is a “structuring structure” as well as a “structured structure,” and it is the “principle of division” as well as the “product of internalization” from the principle of division (1987, 170). That is to say, habitus involves acts of perception, judgments, and classification, which in turn generate new perceptions, judgments, and classification. The whole process is much like a recursive system that continues to build upon itself and produce classifiable works and practices, as well as structured ways of viewing and appreciating the world.

Bourdieu applies habitus to the realm of food and most significantly, taste. This meaning of taste can be used to describe a person’s preference for music, clothing, and entertainment as well as food. Taste “raises the differences inscribed in the physical order of bodies to the symbolic order of significant distinction” (1987, 175). For example in the Filipino case, a predilection of members from a certain Filipino ethnic group for the bitter-tasting *ampalaya* (bittermelon) becomes raised to a symbolic and significant distinction that all Ilocanos savor bitterness because it is a factor of their frugal and meager environment and a reflection of their outlook on life (Fernandez 2008, 69). A physical taste, bitterness,

becomes a symbol of frugality, and becomes attributed to a certain group of people.

Bourdieu writes,

Through taste, an agent has what he likes because he likes what he has, that is, the properties actually given to him in the distributions and legitimately assigned to him in the classifications.

Thus, Bourdieu might argue, Ilocanos like *ampalaya* because they have it, and they have *ampalaya* because they like it. The example of bitterness and *ampalaya* generating a habitus is a smaller and more specific case within Filipino cuisine, but habitus can be modified to address larger issues within Filipino restaurants in America.

Bourdieu's argument is focused on the structures of class and gender, while I apply it more to immigration and ethnicity. "Popular realism... inclines *working people* to reduce practices to the reality of their function, to do what they do, and be what they are... so that what people do, they do as if they were not doing it" (200, emphasis added). I argue that this popular reason is restricted not only to classes of *working people*, but in the case of Filipino restaurants, applies across the whole *ethnic group*. Filipinos reduce their original practices from the homeland—such as taking long lunches or eating seemingly unappetizing food—to the reality of everyday American functions, and in the process, try to do these old practices and be new Americans so that they will retain the integrity of their homeland while still assimilating into American culture. For instance, Filipinos I interviewed told me, "We are a festive people" and that they are not as concerned with money and time as Americans. "It's not strict like as in the USA," one former owner told me, "that when you're supposed to come back at 1:00 exactly, you have to be there or else you'll be in trouble." Other owners mentioned that they had to compromise with Filipino ingredients so that non-Filipinos were not overwhelmed with strange smells or tastes.

In the process, this act of retention and assimilation does not translate well into the landscape of American dining. Filipinos perceive that Filipino culture (read: habitus) and American culture (habitus) have too many conflicting processes—such as attitudes towards time, money, and family. Because of these conflicting processes, Filipinos perceive that there are “no” or “not enough” Filipino restaurants, when they feel there should be many more. Although the Filipino perceptions of time and money are beyond the scope of this paper, I discuss the concepts of family in a later section.

FILIPINO FOOD AND HISTORY

During the Auberge Philippine's first months, its waiters have had the leisure to provide gastrohistory lectures to first-timers. The food is a conglomeration of Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, and Malaysian, they explain... while much of the food is unusual to American tastes, most of it is mild and delicate enough so that diners who are only moderately adventurous will not be unduly shocked.

– Review of Auberge Philippine, the first Filipino restaurant in Washington D.C. Phyllis C. Richman, *Washington Post Magazine* (January 30, 1983)

Understanding Filipino history is integral for understanding Filipino food. Within the Philippines and the U.S., the cuisine is often described in terms of other nationalities instead of in terms of flavor qualities, almost as if the cuisine exists because it is a “conglomeration” of other cuisines, not because of its own unique or unusual characteristics. Restaurant owners I interviewed often explained that Filipino food was a result of cross-cultural exchange, with one owner telling me, “We have the influence of the Spanish people, and then we have all these merchants who come from China, from India, from Indonesia, who come to the Philippines and trade goods so we have their influence too. So we are all a melting pot in the Philippines. And then we have American culture too!”

As an archipelago of over seven thousand islands that include both coastal and mountainous terrain, the Philippines has a rich natural food supply with a variety of rice, fish, meat, fruits, and vegetables. In the 1590s, Spanish explorer and historian Antonio de Morga recorded his observations of natives' food, noting that fish was “abundant” and listed several fruits and vegetables “with which the country teems” (Morga 1609). Because of the persistent tropical climate, inhabitants utilized the technique of stewing foods in a souring agent to keep them from spoiling (Fernandez 1994, 221; Sta. Maria 2006, 89). Dishes such as *sinigang*, *paksiw*, and arguably, *adobo*,⁴ represent this technique.

⁴ There are arguments over whether *adobo* was introduced by the Spanish. Based on dictionaries compiled by the Spanish in the early 1600s, Doreen Fernandez suggests that “Spaniards/Mexicans saw the dish the Filipinos

When the Chinese began trading with Filipinos as early as 800 A.D., merchants sometimes stayed in the islands, married native women, and began their own families. They became the storekeepers and bakers that popularized Chinese food, and they provided cooking implements such as woks and livestock such as ducks and pigs. *Pancit* (noodle dishes) and its various forms in the Philippines trace their origins to the Chinese, as well as *lumpia* (spring rolls) and *siao pao* (meat buns). (See Fernandez 1994, 41, 224; Besa, Dorotan 2006, 73-5)

The Spanish exerted a tremendous influence over Filipino cuisine, introducing numerous new products such as grain-based breads, cheese, *longaniza* (sweet sausage), and the technique of *guisado* (sautéing) on which many Filipino dishes are based (Joaquin 1998, 251; Steinberg 1970, 134). Since government officials were either Spanish or *mestizo* (“mixed” Spanish and native), Spanish-influenced food became associated with and eventually symbolic of urbane and refined life. Many Spanish-Filipino foods such as *brazo de Mercedes* (a rich, buttery cake) or *rellonong manok* (chicken *relleno*, stuffed chicken) today are commonly served during special occasions or are considered fiesta foods (Fernandez 1994, 224-5). Most importantly, the Galleon trade connected Spain to Asia, and goods from around the globe flowed into the Philippines, changing the culinary landscape. From Mexico and Latin America, they added to their diet chocolate, pineapples, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, corn, and learned to perfect their *adobo* technique (Joaquin 1988, 251; Fernandez 1994, 183-200).

When Americans annexed the Philippines after the Spanish-American war, they introduced a variety of foods that Filipinos creatively adjusted to suit their own palates.

were already cooking, recognized its similarity to theirs, and called it ‘adobo de los naturales’” (1994, 196). Filipino adobo today integrates Mexican ingredients like garlic and bay leaves, Chinese ingredients such as soy sauce, and the native ingredient of vinegar.

They fried spam in soy sauce and brown sugar and added it to a breakfast of sunny-side-up eggs and garlic rice (no toast). Hot dogs were cut up and added to spaghetti sauce, which was already sweetened with sugar. Desserts, salads, and burgers were new to the Filipino menu, but were readily incorporated (Besa, Dorotan 2006, 104). The introduction of the icebox and refrigerator also shaped the way Filipinos purchased and preserved their food—buying fresh produce daily was no longer a necessity (Sta. Maria 2006, 247).

With every additional ingredient or new technique, Filipinos adjust them to their tastes and resources to produce a new dish that is foreign-influenced but distinctly Filipino. These dishes become even more important to those who left their homeland to work and earn money for their families abroad. Food becomes intimately tied to the concept of home, a term which includes elements of the family and the nation. Despite the heavy symbolism of food for the Filipino, Filipinos and non-Filipinos alike are unclear about how to characterize their cuisine, and often describe it in terms of other nationalities (as the Auberge Philippine waiters and food critic Phyllis Richman did).⁵ This uncertainty about defining cuisine is part of the deeper issue of defining ethnicity.

Because of their status as a colony, Filipinos have a history with the U.S. that differs in important ways from other Asian peoples. When the Philippines was colonized at the turn of the twentieth century, President McKinley justified the colonization on the principles that it would be “bad business” to let the archipelago be turned over to a rival nation, that

⁵ Perhaps other ethnic cuisines are described in terms of other nationalities as well. Curious about how food critic Phyllis Richman described other cuisines, I looked up her reviews of Ethiopian restaurants, since she claimed that *Auberge Philippine* “serves some of the most exotic food to show up in Washington since the Ethiopians introduced *injera*” (1983). I expected that she might compare Ethiopian food to other types of “exotic” food she had reviewed in the past. Her introduction to the background of Ethiopian cuisine was that “the flavors are unfamiliar and the style of eating... unique among local restaurants” (1979) and that Ethiopian food’s “main distinction” is its seasoning of berberi peppers (1978). She never mentions any other nationalities. On the other hand, perhaps a cross-Asian cultural study may be more revealing, and perhaps Thai or Vietnamese (or even Indonesian) foods are indeed described in terms of others. Still, I find it intriguing that Ethiopian food (and other ethnic cuisines) is exotic in a way that can be defined by its ingredients and style of eating, yet Filipino food must be described in nationalistic terms.

the Filipinos could not govern themselves, and that the only option would be “to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them” (Ocampo 2009, 79). Ways to “educate,” “uplift,” and “civilize” involved sending American teachers to the islands, but also sponsoring Filipino men to attend American universities and subsequently sending them back to the islands to preside as government officials. As state administrators, they applied their American training and education to all levels of government.

During the early twentieth century, Filipino immigrants also found jobs in various regions of the United States. They worked in sugar cane plantations in Hawaii, in salmon canneries in Alaska, and on lettuce and grape farms on the west coast (Takaki 1998, 315-54). After the Immigration Act of 1965 which eliminated nation-origins quotas, many Asians immigrated, including Filipino professionals who moved to other parts of America, including Washington D.C. (Takaki 1998, 419). Today, many Filipinos in D.C. are medical professionals, engineers, and lawyers. They are also maids, cleaning staff, and nannies, as well as teachers, librarians, and journalists. Some are recent immigrants, having arrived within the past decade and are adjusting to American life. Others are “1.5 generation,” people who immigrated with their families when they were children and have since grown up in American society. Others are second generation and beyond, American citizens by birth. As estimated in the 2006-2008 American Community Survey, approximately 50,000 Filipinos in the region consist of 0.9 percent of the total population and 11 percent of the Asian population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008; see also Nadal 2009, 9-29).

Filipinos in the Philippines did not normally eat at restaurants until the latter part of the twentieth century (Cordero-Fernando 1976, 69). Even then, “it is the Spanish/American/continental features of Philippine foodways that are projected,” and when there are “native” dishes, they are cooked with foreign techniques such as with lemon-

butter sauce (Fernandez 1994, 226). Domestic Filipino food (such as *sinigang* and *tinola*) that was served in the public sphere was available usually at in markets or *carinderias* (small restaurants), but rarely on a fine dining level. These attitudes and business models of Filipino food and restaurants were translated to the dining landscape of America as well, albeit made to conform to American standards. For instance, there are no public markets where a proprietor can set up shop and cook day after day. Therefore, an owner of a Filipino restaurant struggles to accommodate the conflicting models of Filipino eating and restaurants with that of American models of eating and restaurants.

METHODS: FINDING THE RESTAURANTS AND PROPRIETORS

Driving directions [from Leesburg, Virginia] to Kabayan Restaurant – Fort Washington,
Maryland
Suggested routes
VA-267 E 1 hour 7 mins
53.3 mi 1 hour 20 mins in traffic

– Google Maps

I underestimated the D.C. metropolitan area. Having grown up in the outskirts of Northern Virginia, my conception of space differed from other D.C. metro natives. I immediately considered a restaurant in Woodbridge, Virginia as a site, but temporarily neglected establishments in Derwood, Maryland. My idea of the D.C. area stretched from the 30 miles between the District to the boundary of my original hometown in Woodbridge, but not the miles between the District and the unknown area of Maryland. I quickly corrected my mistake, and I discovered that there were as many Filipino dining establishments in Maryland as in Virginia. The distance between Derwood and Woodbridge spanned nearly 50 miles, which could take up to an hour and a half to reach in traffic.

Despite the great distances, I managed to visit eleven restaurants throughout northern Virginia and southern Maryland. Restaurants were found with Google Maps: typing in “Filipino food” while viewing a map of Washington D.C. yielded the closest Filipino grocery stores, take-out restaurants, karaoke bars, and more. My search method proved unreliable at times, since some locations were outdated and no longer in business. I rectified these difficulties by cross-listing restaurants through online review sites such as Yelp, UrbanSpoon, and D.C. Metromix to confirm the date of the latest reviews and comments of the restaurants. I also telephoned the restaurants, sometimes hanging up after two minutes of ringing, but usually getting confirmations of the business’s existence. At one

point, I had to rely on word of mouth by asking friends in the area if the restaurant was still around. On two occasions, a friend and I drove out to check if the place was truly there. For a world so digitally connected, it is still possible to run into dead ends, and certainty is only established after hearing confirmation from a trusted friend or seeing the location with my own eyes.

I was also concerned about how to define a Filipino restaurant. For instance, I was hesitant about classifying a bakery or a carryout place as a restaurant because customers did not usually consume their food within the confines of the building. For the purposes of this study, I defined a restaurant as a publicly available and physically contained space where food is produced, distributed, and consumed. “Publicly available” is meant as a contrast against a private function such as a community picnic or someone’s kitchen, and it also means that any individual can readily purchase food and does not need special permission to obtain the food. “Physically contained space” means that there is a building for the staff and customers to function; this would contrast with street vendors or food carts. Finally, by saying that the food is produced (prepared and cooked), distributed, and consumed within the space, this means that customers eat the food within the confines or perimeter of the building. Thus, an eating establishment with a patio is acceptable, but a carryout space that does not have a table and chair for customers does not qualify, nor do grocery stores. I did not visit any bakeries (because the one advertised as a bakery was actually served cooked food as well!), but I visited at least one carryout location, *Philippine Oriental*, the oldest Filipino eating establishment in the area.

Over the course of studying Filipino food restaurants in the Philippines and in America, I have classified restaurants into several different forms, which may overlap but form a kind of hierarchy. I define these based on my own experiences from visiting

restaurants in the Philippines and the United States, as well as other owners' descriptions of their establishments. The terms are as follows:

Turo-turo – literally meaning “point-point,” this term refers to a set-up of food where the server and the food are on one side of the table and the customer is on the other. Food is often prepared in bulk early that day and is placed in containers such as aluminum trays. The food and customer are usually separated by a glass counter, and the customer points to the food he or she wants. The server places the food on the plate and may hand it to the customer, who rings it up at the cashier.

A la carte – owners used this to distinguish their serving style from *turo-turo*. Customers order dishes from a menu and the server brings it to the customer's table.

Buffet – this term applies to a set-up of food where the customer can readily and independently refill his or her plate with a variety of dishes available in a designated space, such as a table against the wall or in the center of a room.

Carinderia – this refers to a small restaurant, not unlike a canteen, which is usually casual and integrates a *turo-turo*. It can also use a la carte serving style, but I have rarely seen buffet *carinderias*.

Fine dining – this can encompass any number of restaurants, big or small, but is more refined than a *carinderia* in the sense that the décor is more upscale, the staff and customers may dress more formally, and the ambience is more subdued and conducive to private talk rather than loud chatter. Usually fine dining restaurants use a la carte serving style, but one restaurant I visited also had a buffet.

Typically *turo-turos* are considered to be at the bottom of this hierarchy, only a few steps up from a food stall in the Philippines. *Carinderias* are the next level of restaurants, and fine dining establishments are at the top level of refinement and reflect Filipinos' perceptions of Americanized ideals of space and taste. Note that it seems among Filipinos, *turo-turos* are considered the most "Filipino," while fine dining restaurants are the most "American." The majority of restaurants I visited were combination *turo-turo* and *carindaria*.

While in the Philippines from November 2008 to May 2009, I felt it important to interview certain Filipinos in the Philippines about their experiences with food and restaurants. After all, how could I understand Filipino American culture without gaining an understanding of Filipino culture? Recent immigrants or American-born Filipino Americans tend to look at the Philippines for their original and "authentic" culture. Thus, I interviewed Rea Anchores, owner of *Smoke*, a popular restaurant in an island of the Philippines famous for its international tourists and party atmosphere. I also spoke to Joyce Sandoval, a businesswoman from the Mama Sita Corporation, a popular business that markets Filipino sauces and mixes worldwide. She also introduced me to a former owner of a Filipino restaurant in Fort Collins, Colorado, who had since left and was also contributing to Mama Sita operations in Manila.

From the time I returned to America in May and until September 2009, I interviewed proprietors of Filipino restaurants in D.C. Five owners from the eleven eating establishments discussed their experiences with administering their business, customer relations, and their thoughts on Filipino food. Ideally, I would have spoken to all restaurant owners, but at least I was able to engage in participant-observation by eating a meal at every restaurant.

Unable to provide an etic perspective of Filipino food myself, I asked two friends, Macs and Morgan, to join me as participant-observers and dine in the restaurants. Since both of my food-tasters had grown up in the Northern Virginia area, they were well acquainted with the region and knowledgeable of the other ethnic restaurants in the area. In addition, they are both Caucasian, middle class, well-educated (undergraduates at the time), and had very little prior knowledge of Filipino cuisine before this project. They also brought unique perspectives to the dishes based on their personal and professional experiences with food.⁶

Over the summer, our trio traveled from our distant points in Virginia to meet at that day's restaurant and enjoy a meal together. I hoped to provide an emic perspective on the food and incorporate my notions of Filipino food as based on my family's home cooking and food I had tasted while researching in the Philippines. I recorded notes on the food, ambience, number of customers, time of day, service, and clarified questions for Macs and Morgan. They also kept track of their experiences and submitted to me their observations by the end of the summer. Unfortunately, my food-tasters were not able to visit every restaurant in the area with me due to time, money, and transportation constraints, but they did dine at the majority of establishments.

I am compelled to note several difficulties I faced while conducting this research. Traveling around the Washington D.C. area was a feat in itself. This was exacerbated by my lack of a car and the fact that Leesburg is over twenty miles away from the nearest metro station. With Macs driving from Annandale, Morgan coming from Chantilly, and me busing

⁶ For instance, Morgan is allergic to gluten and lactose, which means that she cannot consume many familiar mainstream American staples such as bread and pasta. Often she turns to rice or corn for her starch intakes and has to be creative with her recipes and meals, so she welcomes new suggestions for food that will conform to her diet. My other friend and food-tester, Macs, is a self-made gourmet of the French persuasion. Cooking French dishes for his family gives him great joy, and his favorite job was as a waiter for Les Halles, a popular French restaurant on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington D.C.

from Leesburg, we had to coordinate carpooling and take in traffic and gas price considerations, especially when traveling to Maryland. Even traveling within Virginia was difficult—when commuting to a restaurant in Springfield, taking the bus and the metro from Leesburg took two hours. Towards the end of the project, my food-tasters were not keen on driving to Maryland, and I had to visit those restaurants with my father. For customers craving Philippine food, a car is practically a necessity.

However, the most limiting factor of all proved to be issues with the interviewees. I called all the restaurants and explained my project, but the owners were often frustrated, believed I was a solicitor, or misunderstood what I wanted due to language barriers or confusion over the project. This produced some bizarre conversations. For instance, I called a restaurant in Fort Washington, Maryland and spoke in unaccented English, asking for the owners' names and the opportunity to speak with them. The speaker on the other line scolded me for being unprofessional and hung up the phone. I called back the next day and spoke in Tagalog and Filipino-accented English. The speaker responded amiably in Tagalog and told me she would let the owner know. Experiences like this made me realize the conflicted nature of Filipino identity—I identify as being part of the Filipino community, yet there were barriers to other Filipinos believing such a fact. However, these barriers were overcome when I used Tagalog as a type of social capital to gain acquaintance and recognition in this Filipino American context.

In another case, I was given a restaurant owner's cell phone number, yet when I called, another person answered—told me this was not the owner's phone, yet in the same conversation, told me the owner was not available and would be back later. Confused, I asked if I could leave a message, and the person hung up. I mentioned this story to a former boss and my father—the former Filipina, the latter Romanian—and they both suggested that

this could be due to a troubled citizenship status or legal and financial woes and that the owners probably wished to avoid any strange callers. In contrast, staff and owners responded better when they saw me in public. Often they would ask if I were Filipino and if I spoke Tagalog. Despite this, many proprietors were not able to schedule interviews with me, either because of their busy schedules or because they never responded to my letters or phone calls. Ideally I would have been able to interview owners from every establishment, but I am still satisfied with the eight owners with whom I conversed.

LOOKING EAST, LOOKING WEST

DEE: There's a point I'm making! We've yet to MAKE OUR MARK! We've got to be known for more than being something NOT Chinese or Japanese! For something other than MacArthur, and Marcos, and the color yellow, and a thousand SHOES!

– Jeannie Barroga, *Talk-Story* (1997)

“Maybe there was just not enough pride in the food initially,” Joyce Sandoval mused when I asked her why she thought Filipino food was not as popular in America as other Asian cuisines. “Because maybe some Filipinos tend to look east more, west more, than look at what they can offer.”

If there was not enough pride in the food initially, it seems that Filipino Americans eagerly search for a sense of pride in other forms. Students join Filipino student organizations, adults organize community picnics and galas, and community centers offer dance lessons and Tagalog classes. All of these are for the purposes of “remembering our heritage” and “so that we do not forget our culture.” This is what makes restaurants so interesting as sites for the public demonstration of ethnicity: student organizations, community picnics, and dance lessons are part of a counterpublic that is “constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public” (Warner 2002, 118); in this case, the conflict is between being Filipino and being “mainstream American.” Restaurants are also part of this counterpublic, but they are more readily accessible to non-Filipinos because they involve minimal commitment from the customer to the ethnic group. A customer can enter the restaurant, exchange several words with the server, eat a meal, pay the check, and leave. A Filipino cultural organization may ask a participant to learn new dance steps or new words in a Filipino language, which could be potentially embarrassing and uncomfortable if surrounded by people already knowledgeable of the dance or language. On the other hand, a restaurant customer does not even need to know how to pronounce the names of the dishes

to have a “cultural experience” and can easily experience Filipino culture without necessarily having to learn anything about it.

Restaurants could potentially be the best way to demonstrate pride in Filipino heritage. Cho gave examples of customers who were pleased to see photographs of the Philippines in her restaurant:

A lot of people are like, ‘Oh, this is where we were last time we were here!’ and Americans too, like, ‘Ah, this is from the town of my girlfriend! They’re so proud of, you know, the Philippines. They’re very, very proud. And some, like last night, they said—1970, he was in the Philippine for six days and Christmas, too. And we were closing and he still likes to talk about the Philippines. He’s so proud of the Philippines, and he is so proud also that, ‘Now I can see a restaurant, a Philippine restaurant!’ he said. ‘I’m looking for this for a long time.’

Cho’s restaurant, *Lumpia Pansit atbp*, is one of the few Filipino restaurants in the area that can be considered fine dining. Framed photographs adorn the walls and complement the dark polished tables. A soda dispenser and large television are towards the back of the restaurant, lending a more casual air to the space, but do not clash with the rest of the décor. To the right of the entrance is a *dulang* (low table) that is decorated with faux ivy and flowers and apparently used during special occasions such as customers celebrating a birthday. Menus are also printed on paper designed with flowers, bamboo, and pictures of the food with clear and concise descriptions of dishes. The *adobo* I ordered was served on beautiful green ceramic plates shaped to look like large leaves, reminding me of all the meals I relished in the Philippines that were served on banana leaves.

Certainly the refined setting of the restaurant is something to be proud of, but this does not seem to be what the customers are referring to in Cho’s story. Rather, it appears that pride, for Filipinos, is the praise and recognition for being definitive and distinctive as Filipino. Therefore, it is also possible to have pride in Filipino restaurants that may not be as refined, because they conform to other standards of what “being Filipino” means. An anecdote from a Foods of the World Time Life series cookbook illustrates this:

But Filipinos almost never serve *bagoong* or *patis* to foreigners, even with dishes that cry out for one or the other. They regard the two products with a fierce, inverted pride, defying Westerners to eat them. One of the vivid memories of my stay in the Philippines is the crestfallen look on a waiter's face when I added some *bagoong* to my adobo and ate it with enjoyment; he seemed to feel that I had somehow violated his country's authority. (Steinberg 1970, 130)

Bagoong (fermented shrimp/fish paste) and *patis* (fish sauce) are not considered “refined,” as they are not difficult to produce and are found in all levels of Filipino cuisine. Rather, these products are examples of foods that Filipinos consider unique and special to their culture, and so for some Filipinos, they become a symbol of pride.⁷

Assuming for the moment that we know what “being Filipino” is, Cho's customers are proud because they have a connection to a homeland and are seeing it praised and recognized in the definitive and distinctive site of a Filipino restaurant. Pride indicates that there is a coherent identity an individual or ethnic group may claim in order to distinguish the self (or group self) from the majority. Pride promotes a sense of camaraderie and security in opposition to the majority. Even though Cho's customers just met her, they are eager to tell her about their lives in the Philippines even until the store closes, because they feel they have found companionship with people who understand their background. Within this safe haven of the Filipino restaurant, their qualities of “being Filipino” are viewed as similarities as an ethnic group and praised as a source of pride, instead of as differences from American society that are disapproved of for being strange or foreign.

Restaurants provide a way to display identity because they are places where a Filipino can talk about food and memories, which are intimately tied to the Filipino's notions of “home.” Various modes and media of Filipino culture coalesce and shape a coherent idea of what “being Filipino” means in the western institution of a restaurant. The Filipino

⁷ At the Filipino Intercollegiate Networking Dialogue, Inc. conference on November 21, 2009, one of the keynote speakers spoke of Filipino heritage in these terms: “Even if one drop of *bagoong* runs in your veins, you are a Filipino!” essentially using food as a metaphor for biological functions and relating it to an inherent sense of Filipino culture.

restaurant takes images (photographs, paintings, Filipino channels playing on the TV) and objects (the *dulang*, statues as décor, the leaf-shaped plates), which may be present in other Filipino cultural activities, and presents it within the context of food and socializing. This begs the question, why are food and socializing so important to the Filipino? Additionally, how do food and socializing shape the Filipino's definition of being Filipino?

I will return to these questions in another section, but for now, Joyce's comments involved not only pride, but a sense of conflicted identity. Joyce's speculation about lack of pride and suggestion of the Filipino's outward gaze to foreign powers are both deeply rooted in the history and colonization of Filipinos. It seems that Filipinos are caught in a polar situation of eastern heritage or western influence, but forget that their culture is the middle ground; in this confusion, they lack a sense of national "pride." Filipino national artist Nick Joaquin critiqued this problem as such:

Identity is such a problem for us because we are of two minds about it. On the one hand we say that we must change, we must leave the past behind, we must move forward, we must update. On the other hand we insist that there is a fixed primeval Filipino identity to which we must make our way back. And at the same time we are asking: "What *is* the identity of the Filipino today?" (1988, 397)

Joaquin argues that the "fixed primeval" identity usually refers to Filipinos before Spanish colonization, which refers to the indigenous natives but also includes Asian influences, namely Chinese. He claims that Filipinos tend to see culture in a static state, as if there were a fixed point of Filipino-ness, and foreign influences were placed on top of it. His observation is similar to how the interviewees spoke of their culture, as if caught between two poles of Asian and Western.

The use of east and west implies that the Philippines is still central on the map—it is just overlooked. Filipinos do not often look to their own land and pre-Hispanic customs for inspiration, because the meaning of Filipino identity is contentious and continually under the scrutiny of Filipinos themselves. Similarly, Filipino cuisine becomes contentious and

continually under the scrutiny of Filipinos themselves. Sometimes Filipinos give answers rooted in the East, rooted in the West, but rarely rooted in simply themselves. After all, how could they give certain and steady answers about their cuisine (and implicitly, their identity) if they feel the very culture in which they are rooted in uncertain and unsteady? Furthermore, a sense of pride arises from a need to be defined and distinct—in contrast to what? In the case of Filipinos, this ideal of pride is a form of opposition that keeps Filipinos from being overwhelmed by different foreign powers, particularly colonial powers that have sought to mold the natives into another nationality.

Since the question of Filipino identity in the Philippines is so conflicted, how does Filipino identity compare in America? Filipino Americans have to contend with dual identities: keeping the Filipino culture from their families' homeland, yet also conforming to American society. However, it is in this process of conflicting identities that “being Filipino (American)” emerges and becomes clearer. At times, it is more beneficial for the Filipino to “look west” and align Filipinos with Americans; at other times the Filipino “looks east” and empathizes with other Asian ethnicities. When does the Filipino choose to look in one direction rather than another, and how does this clarify the meaning of “being Filipino”?

ON BEING AMERICAN OR ASIAN

I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.

– Zora Neale Hurston, *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* (1928)

But sometimes we wonder if we are really a part of America... Sometimes we walk across the land looking for something to hold on to.

– Carlos Bulosan, *Freedom from Want* (1943)

I sat across from restaurant owner Violet⁸ while she scooped ground pork and diced vegetables into a *lumpia* wrapper and deftly folded the filling into a tight little roll. The chef, Maria⁵, sat next to her, hands unoccupied but watching me carefully as I asked them questions about their restaurant. As they listed their most popular items on their menu, Violet began another *lumpia* and posed a question to me: “Do you like *dinuguan*?”

“Ahh...” I paused. The truth was, I was never fond of *dinuguan*—it tasted too strongly of iron and took its time dripping off my spoon. I decided to respond with the way it had been traditionally presented to me in the Philippines. “Only if it’s with *puto*.”

At the mention of the small fluffy rice cakes, the women’s faces lit up. “Ah!” exclaimed Maria. “She *is* Filipino!” In that moment, I had crossed the line from stranger to familiar, from an English-speaking American to a Tagalog-accented Filipina. If I knew the correct pairing of food items within Filipino cuisine, I probably knew the other customs and cultural norms that separated Filipinos from Americans.

Although I went into the interview thinking we were all Filipino Americans, I realized that these women had created different categories for themselves. By my knowledge of their cuisine, I had crossed categories from (American) Other to (Filipino) Self. What were the categories Filipinos created in order to distinguish themselves from others? How were these categories more useful at certain times than others for defining Filipino identity?

⁸ Name changed

To many of these restaurant owners, “American” usually carried the connotation of “white.” Sometimes they clarified and said, “black American,” but never “Filipino American” or another Asian American. Sometimes “American” simply meant “non-Filipino,” but it was always a vague term that meant someone who did not look like Filipinos and did not know Filipino customs and food.

Evelyn Bunoan, food columnist for several local Filipino American newspapers and owner of *Philippine Oriental* Store, one of the oldest Filipino food establishments in the D.C., told me a story about a prominent Filipina American community activist who ordered some Filipino food from Evelyn’s carryout and brought it back home to her family. “The husband, who’s *pure American* (emphasis added), said, ‘This food is good!’ And then [she] said, ‘That’s Filipino food.’ And then, ‘Oh. Are you sure? This is Filipino food? It’s that good.’”

“Pure American” in this case seems to be someone who represents the archetypal mainstream American. Evelyn never specified if the husband was white, but her story shows that he was far removed from Filipino customs such that he thought Filipino food was bad before, and upon tasting “good” Filipino food, was surprised by the quality. Evelyn’s story was meant to show that her restaurant’s food was so good that even “pure” Americans could taste and enjoy it, but it also implies that mainstream Americans do not usually find Filipino food appetizing. Evelyn gave other examples, saying that she had to adjust the amount of *bagoong* that she included in her dishes, lest its pungent flavor and smell be off-putting to her customers. Americans in particular would find it disgusting: “they won’t even look at it, they hate the smell.”

Rea Anchores, owner of *Smoke* restaurant in popular world tourist destination Boracay, Philippines, opined that Americans did not seem adventurous when it came to

food. Most of the American customers who came to her restaurant would order burgers. In fact, one time when joining her family for a dinner of fried fish, she told me, “Ask the [restaurant] staff downstairs to make you something. This is too Filipino for you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Although I loved the food at *Smoke* and had no problem climbing down the spiral stairs from the living area to the actual restaurant space, I was slightly alarmed at what was “too Filipino” for me.

“There’s too many bones.”

I pouted. “I eat bones...”

I eventually got both a dish from the menu, as well as a taste of the bony fried fish, and we continued our dinner while watching the Filipino News Channel. But I had similar encounters throughout the Philippines where Filipinos thought I would not enjoy certain foods because I was perceived as a “Filipino American” and not a “Filipino Filipino.” Other restaurant owners in America confirmed the sentiment that Americans were not “adventurous” and spoke of Americans as having blander palates, and that some Filipino food used ingredients that seemed repulsive to them.

The categorization of American was an implicit act of “looking east” as a source of contrast to mainstream Americans. Filipino restaurant owners seemed to accept that they were not (and probably would never be) part of white mainstream America, and that their market revolved around niche communities. Filipinos did not explicitly compare themselves to Americans in the same way they compared themselves to Asians, possibly indicating that they categorized themselves closer to Asians than Americans. This in turn may indicate a distancing from their history as colonized peoples and aligning themselves with a more “model minority” of American society. The owners did not compare themselves to a group of Americans; they made observations about how Americans act, which in turn revealed that

the Filipino would behave in the opposite manner. Thus the American who would order burgers and shun Filipino food suggests that Filipino food is different and more adventurous, although it also carried negative connotations of being repulsive to Americans. Regardless, Filipinos would not take this negatively, they would humorously reply that they are braver in their food choices than Americans and more willing to compromise and try new things.

Although Filipinos distinguished themselves from a variety of nationalities, including Thai, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Chinese, they described all of these groups in the same terms: non-English speaking, less educated (implicitly in comparison to Filipinos) and “tight-knit” (explicitly in comparison to Filipinos). Because of these perceived factors, these other Asian ethnic restaurants were more prominent in American dining. Because Filipinos speak English, are more educated, and less “tight-knit,” they could assimilate into American society with a higher socioeconomic status. This implied that opening a restaurant did not produce as much social and economic capital as being a doctor or an engineer. Because Filipinos felt they had advantages over other Asians that helped them adjust to American society, they pursued careers that would earn money and acceptance from Americans.

For instance, Filipinos attributed the prominence of other Asian restaurants to the perceived fact that Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese owners did not speak English. This was at the core of those ethnicities’ experiences in America and explained their education, work skills, and perceived unity. “The Chinese, they cannot speak English, so the only thing they can do is open a Chinese laundry and a Chinese restaurant,” one interviewee told me. Another added, “And like Koreans, you know they’ll have a small place with coffee and little sandwich place, but they cannot speak the language. They cannot speak English. They will just, you know, we pay them, it’s understood, they have this sign—and go!”

The perceived lack of Filipino restaurants is a sign of Filipinos' self-understanding as English-speakers and Americans. Because Filipinos spoke English, they were therefore well-educated and on track to assuming other (more highly paid) jobs and careers in American society. In this case, owning a restaurant was not seen as an independent, risk-taking, be-your-own-boss move: it was the only option for people who could not move up higher on the socioeconomic ladder. Preparing and serving food required little skill, so better for the Filipino to pursue a skilled professional job.

The lack of English was also the reason Filipinos thought other Asian ethnic groups were less educated and more prone to serve in the restaurant business. "If you will go around and survey the Vietnamese community," one owner stated, "you can see that these people who run restaurants are the ones that don't really have a degree where they can work somewhere else like an engineer or a doctor." The idea in the Filipino community is that Filipinos are different from other Asians in that they usually held college degrees in fields that were not conducive to the hospitality and restaurant business—Filipinos were on track in the medical and science fields which held greater social and economic capital.

Finally, Filipino restaurant owners pointed to unity and financial assistance as the main success of other Asians in the restaurant industry. "If you compare us to other Asians, I guess groups like Koreans that are very successful, it's because they do help each other out. Your Chinese, your Vietnamese communities are very, very successful..." one owner mentioned. "I think they are a bit more, how would you say? Tight knit—or what would be a good word for them—I'm thinking of a word that's basically, that's a bit more together or organized, in a way—who favor success of one another." Another owner explained, "Chinese, Koreans, Vietnamese, you know, they help each other. They help financially."

This claim sounded strange to me, so I mentioned it to one of my friends who works as a waiter in his family's Vietnamese restaurant in western Virginia. My friend laughed and replied that Vietnamese were just as much in competition with each other as anyone else, and that if anything, his parents thought other ethnic groups (Chinese, Korean) were more united and financially stable because the community helped its own members. Yet many Filipinos I spoke with perceive that other groups are more "together" and helpful to one each other, and therefore they have more restaurants. This implies that if Filipinos would be more helpful and supportive of each other, they would also experience the same success in that particular business. Filipinos do pride themselves on their other successes (well-educated, English-speaking), but in a career-oriented community, they feel that restaurants belong to an unstable industry and are not high priorities or safe options for a long-term successful job. In many cases, the restaurant owners I spoke with fulfilled many of these self-assessed traits: they spoke English, they had gone to school for cooking or hospitality services, or at the very least they had experience with cooking from working with their parents in the kitchen or in a small home business. But their common thread was that they had parents who worked with food before, either by owning a small store in the Philippines or working as a chef on a cruise liner, or simply by cooking meals daily for the family.

Because Filipinos have such a contentious sense of identity, they can only define themselves in contrast to another group, whether it is American or Asian. For the Filipino, there exists a "sharp white background" against which their "colored" nature is exposed, but there also exists a "sharp yellow background" against which their "brownness" is highlighted. The identity of a Filipino only becomes pronounced when it is thrown in contrast to another, but even then, it is still debatable and conflicted. One of these points of

debate and conflict is the notion of “being tight-knit,” which some Filipinos interpret as a failure to integrate into American society, but also a regret of losing connections with other Filipinos. Pride in “being Filipino” incorporates feelings of success as well as regret, since Filipinos feel they may have gained a space in American society, yet lost their place in their original homeland and culture.

A FEW WORDS ON “TIGHT-KNIT”

Crab mentality can be defined as the desire to outdo, outshine, or surpass another (often of one's same ethnic group) at the other's expense (Tan-Alora & Lumitao, 2001). While there is very little literature that describes this concept in academic research, it is an idea well-known in the Filipino American community.

– Kevin Nadal, *Filipino American Psychology* (2009)

The term “tight-knit” is a subjective and problematic term to apply to other ethnicities. Other ethnicities appear tight-knit, but Filipinos are not as together or organized. Does this mean Filipinos are more independent, socially mobile, or simply too busy to financially support or patronize Filipino restaurants? One interviewee offered, “This is a big risk, so I guess most Filipinos are not risk takers.” But does this mean that Chinese, Koreans, or Vietnamese are necessarily risk takers? Or is it because of their perceived lower position on the socioeconomic ladder that they are pressured to start businesses in a risky industry? The interviewees did not elaborate, but one interviewee offered a story radically different from other opinions about pride in being Filipino and being part of the Filipino American community.

“What are some of the difficulties or low points you have experienced in your restaurant?” I asked one owner, anticipating stories about customer complaints or mishaps in the kitchen. His answer caught me completely off guard.

“The low points would be your very own Filipino.” He chuckled wryly. “You know, your community. I mean, you can't please everybody. Jealousy will always be there, which is always very low, and which makes me say sometimes that I, you know, am ashamed to be a Filipino.”

My mind raced. Here was a side of “being Filipino” that Filipinos rarely talked about. “How did it manifest itself?” I asked. “Like was it comments from people, or just...?”

“We have comments and then you have, you know, gossips and things like that. I don’t know, I mean, it’s just—it’s just a disease within the Filipino community. It really saddens and I’m sure it saddens a lot of people. I’ve seen it being exposed in this type of business. You have Filipinos that walk in and out, and that’s just the hardest part. That really is the hardest part. I mean, it’s not really easy to deal with your fellow Filipinos.”

Here was the hardest strike against the notions of pride that other Filipinos had mentioned. I felt I had stumbled upon a hidden rock that I had somehow always known was there. Memories of other interactions with Filipinos began creeping into the foreground of my mind. “Do you think that’s—I don’t know—a quality that manifests itself or comes about when Filipinos come to America? Like, do you see that among a different generation or do you... I don’t know,” I floundered, overtaken by the truth I felt in his statement and the bitterness from recognizing a quality in a community with which I identified. “That’s interesting.”

“That’s just Filipino, period,” he said matter-of-factly. “I mean, I guess if that’s their attitude back home, they can’t leave it back home. They have to bring it here.”

“Interesting. It’s really interesting.”

“Really, and you know, being here for twenty-two, twenty-three years, Amanda, and my experience, and I never used to believe in saying those things, but then again I have seen it myself. I’m not proud to say that, and I never wanted to believe that and it hurts to hear, but being exposed and you know, seeing it for myself, it really validates what those people have said to me and what I’ve heard before about how Filipinos are.”

I left the restaurant with my mind reeling. Throughout the remainder of the summer, owners told me rosy stories of their interactions with other Filipinos. If they had difficulties with their restaurants, the explanations were vague or a consequence of the recession or non-Filipinos having low expectations of Filipino food. For instance, Cho surmised, “I think they’re comparing our food to Chinese and sometimes McDonalds.” But I did not hear any other stories of Filipinos jealous of each other.

Yet I include this story because it demonstrates the politics of ethnicity within the Filipino community.⁹ There is a sense that Filipinos are not as “tight knit” as compared to other ethnic groups, but they need to be “tight knit” in comparison to Americans. But here, the interviewee offers the view that Filipinos do not always take pride in another Filipino’s accomplishments. In fact, just the opposite occurs: jealousy and gossip which may hurt the business. Why is there the sense that Filipinos should support other Filipinos, and when this does not happen, it poses a difficulty?

As a historically marginalized group in society, Filipinos have had to rely on each other for support in a new country. There is an expectation from Filipinos that they will help each other by virtue of the fact that they are Filipino, meaning that they have a common homeland and heritage. However, in an increasingly mobile and distanced society, Filipinos have less and less in common with each other and do not become as attached to their local Filipino communities. Thus the conflict is between “being Filipino” and “being American.” In the Filipino mindset, being a Filipino in the Philippines may have entailed knowing one’s neighbors and storekeepers, but being American connotes a sense of distance

⁹ I speculate that other owners may have found it difficult to admit problems within the Filipino community, because as older immigrants speaking to a younger second generation “half” Filipina, they may have wanted to portray “our” community as more tight-knit. I wonder if another ethnographer who had more in common with them (Filipina, first generation, older, native speaker of Tagalog and English) may have received different stories.

from others. A Filipino American is at once a *kababayan* (fellow countryman) and a stranger—when entering a restaurant, the owner and the customer negotiate these identities and choose which roles come into play at which times. The concept of “tight-knit” applies only when comparing Filipinos to other ethnic groups or nationalities.

Yet the owner says that Filipinos have brought this “attitude” with them from the Philippines. I admit I find this statement puzzling. Can this attitude even be attributed as a cultural trait? Is this something “inherent” in Filipino culture? Is it an effect of Americanization that has been internalized by Filipinos? It can be so easy to blame Americanization or capitalism for negative traits within an ethnic group, and I do not believe this is what the restaurant owner is necessarily saying. Perhaps the issue is not, “Who is to blame?” or “What is the source of this mentality?” but that some Filipinos perceive a real problem within their community that they believe is inherent in their culture and one of the causes for failure or lack of success—not only in restaurants, but in other parts of business and entertainment as well.

RECONSTRUCTION OF HOME

In the Philippines, before the markets and carinderias, the restaurants and the cooking schools, there were the mothers, sisters, aunts and grandmothers of our lives, cooking every meal, and ultimately creating what we call Philippine cuisine.

– Doreen Fernandez, *Mother Cuisine*

Home is the central unit and support system for the Filipino. Within this concept are multiple layers of meaning: kinship, regionalism, the homeland. Growing up, my mother told us stories about her parents, brothers, and sisters, and made sure we knew all our cousins' names and the corresponding honorific titles to mark them as elders. This was one level of "home": the immediate and extended family. She also encouraged us to use the honorifics *Tita/Tito* (Aunt/Uncle) and *Lola/Lolo* (Grandmother/Grandfather) when addressing any adult Filipinos. Not until I was an adolescent did I ask her, "Why do we have so many relatives?" before realizing that we were not actually related. In this sense, other Filipinos were considered to be family by virtue of the fact that they were Filipinos themselves.¹⁰

Although I was born in America and visited the Philippines only two times as a child before my six-month stay as an adult, Filipinos and Filipino Americans would exclaim, "Oh, it's so good that you're able to go home!" It did not matter that I barely spoke any of my mother's native languages or that I was unfamiliar with parts of Filipino culture, the Philippines was still "home." It seems that the concept of "home" can extend to the entire nation of the Philippines itself.

Earlier I posed the questions, why are food and socializing so important to the Filipino? How do food and socializing shape the Filipino's definition of "being Filipino"?

¹⁰ This also occurs in the Philippines but to different degrees. I referred to my friends' parents as *Tita/Tito*, but I also referred to jeepney drivers, cab drivers, and street vendors as *Kuya/Ate* (Older Brother/Older Sister).

Food becomes a potent symbol for conjuring up memories of family, hometowns, and the Philippines itself. Food in the Philippines is traditionally prepared in *nanay's kusina* or in a *carinderia*; therefore, its symbolic load, especially outside of the Philippines, is one of comfort food and nostalgia. Filipino food frames memory and links the past and the present together. Demonstrated within a public space, the restaurant has the ability to extend this frame further with its décor and atmosphere, and thereby induce nostalgia and recreate home life. For instance, the restaurants I visited either imitated *turo-turos* back in the Philippines, or had decorations such as photographs of iconic Filipino images such as jeepneys, rice terraces, festivals, and *kalesas* (Spanish horse drawn carriages in Manila). Or the television would be tuned to a Filipino game show and other customers would converse in Filipino languages, filling the space with the words and sounds of the homeland. To eat at a Filipino restaurant as a Filipino customer is to eat a familiar meal in a familiar space as a form of reminiscing.

However, the meals are familiar in the sense that they are the food similar to what is found at home, and the space is familiar in the sense that they conjure popular images of the Philippines. They do not replicate the act of eating in the home, they reconstruct it. Restaurants become reconstructed spaces of home by virtue of the food they serve and the presentation of the meal. For instance, in *turo-turo* restaurants, the food is set out in front of the customer behind a glass panel. In a Filipino home, the food is set out on a table in front of the family with all the dishes up for grabs and no specific order for consuming the food—the idea of a salad course, entrees, sides, and desserts is a Western idea originating with the Spanish and clarified by the Americans.

John dela Rosa, owner of *Kababayan* in Woodbridge, Virginia, pointed out that his menu was “what you would find on a daily prepared meal that you would do at home.

...What we do here is just a home cooked meal 'cause that's what basically most people long for." *Kababayan* is a classic *turo-turo carinderia*, with dishes daily rotating and extra space for tables and chairs. There were no labels for the food simmering in the aluminum pans on the other side of the glass, which gave food-testers Macs and Morgan some difficulties in choosing their dishes. Instead, they asked me what I recommended, and I suggested certain items based on what I remembered from my mother's kitchen.

The food from my mother's kitchen is my basis for authenticity. Authentic Filipino food is home-cooked food. Here is another reason for the perceived lack of restaurants—how does a Filipino customer know if a restaurant will serve “authentic” Filipino food, i.e., the food he knows from his *nanay's kusina*? Because there is doubt about the genuine nature of the food, customers may not be as willing to go to the restaurant.

Yet Filipino restaurants exist because Filipinos have had to assimilate and adapt to the American lifestyle. They have eight-hour work days, made longer by commuting, and they are often too tired to cook. John acknowledged that his *turo-turo* was based on a market for Filipino professionals who had little time to eat. “With their limited time of just grabbing lunch, that's what we target primarily,” he explained. Even after the lunch hour, “many are beating traffic, trying to get home here to the county, and basically they just don't have the time. They sit in traffic for thirty to forty-five minutes and by the time they get home, basically they don't have the energy or even the urge to cook, so they either call us to prepare something for them or set something aside for them so they can just pick it up.” Forced to adapt to these notions of time, many Filipino restaurants do not concentrate on the luxury experience of dining out, and many customers do not worry too much about the authenticity of the food since they are too tired to cook their own “authentic” food.

Perhaps because the restaurant seems like an extension of home life, Filipinos overlook their dining establishments and quip, “There are no Filipino restaurants in D.C.” What they may mean is, there are no “American” restaurants in D.C. that serve Filipino food. Unlike a Thai or Chinese restaurant that may be decorated with scrolls, calligraphy, and have Asian-inspired music playing in the background to recreate an East Asian experience, the Filipino restaurant makes no pretenses about recreating an exotic, imagined Filipino world. Rather, the owners seek to provide comfort food to customers who are tired, hungry, and want a familiar taste of home—whether home recalls memories of family or the homeland. Restaurants become recreated views of the home life, transposed into the public market, and adjusted to meet American needs of time constraints and financial concerns.

This is noticeable outside of the Filipino American community. As my friend Macs observed, “The restaurants we went to were uncompromising in their identity. They were Filipino, not ‘Filipino-Themed.’ For the most part, they called a dish what they would have called it themselves, and not ‘Spicy Beef’ or ‘Sweet and Sour Pork’ when the real name was too hard to pronounce.”¹¹ On the other hand, as a non-Filipino, Macs found this alienating. “This can be a turn-off for many American food consumers,” he explained. “It is frustrating to go to a restaurant and feel like an outsider. In fact, I would say that it is almost fundamental to a restaurant’s success that it succeed in making customers feel at home.”

¹¹ However, other ethnic establishments such as French and Italian restaurants may have their menus written in French and Italian, and customers find this acceptable. This is because French and Italian restaurants have different historical experiences as compared to Filipino eateries. For instance, French cuisine was considered *haute* cuisine in America in the eighteenth century and thus has always been a symbol of refinement and high class (Ray 2001, 99; see Levenstein 2003). Italian food was considered the food of immigrants, but throughout the twentieth century, became more integrated into American society as Italians became more prominent in the work force, married non-Italians, and raised children who quickly adapted to American ideals. Essentially, as Italians assimilated into American society, so did their cuisine become more readily acceptable to non-Italians until eventually, it became recognized as an American food (Ray 2001, 101-2, see Levenstein 1993).

This statement strikes a chord with a conversation I had with Joyce several months earlier. “Success is relative,” she explained. “A successful product for the Filipino market may not be as successful for the non-Filipino market.” It appears that Filipino restaurants are successful in the sense that they “succeed in making customers feel at home.” But these eating establishments are not necessarily successful in marketing to a non-Filipino consumer base. There exists a niche market, and they are content to cater to that niche market. Some restaurant owners remarked that entrepreneurialism was not a quality valued within Filipino culture, but I believe this is not necessarily true. Rather, the concept of “home” with its connotations of family and homeland is of greater value and priority to the Filipino. Creating a space like a restaurant that embraces nostalgia instead of marketability is “being more Filipino,” and becomes a source of definition and distinction for Filipinos. These places can be a source of pride for Filipinos in the sense that they promote a safe haven for nostalgia and camaraderie. In a dining landscape that celebrates trendy cuisines and exoticism, the owners and customers of Filipino restaurants stubbornly resist and keep their establishments as loci of a recreated home world.

CONCLUSION

...And at the same time we are asking: “What *is* the identity of the Filipino today?”

Everybody thinks that is a question impossible to answer.

Actually the answer is very easy and very plain.

The identity of the Filipino today is of a person asking what *is* his identity.

– Nick Joaquin, *Culture and History* (1988)

In response to “What is Filipino food?” Joyce echoes Nick Joaquin: “I define it as, Filipino food in the sense that it is the food that Filipinos of today eat. So that, to me, is Filipino food. If you’re a Filipino and you eat that, it’s Filipino food. It may be contemporary, not traditional anymore, but it’s Filipino. Food for Filipinos. Or food that has been influenced by Filipinos.” Clearly this encompasses a huge domain of food: so Chinese carryout and McDonalds are also as “Filipino” as *adobo* and *pancit*?

I do not take Joyce’s statement quite literally; instead, I believe she means that there is a fluid definition of Filipino cuisine, and that it is more dependant on the individual than on regional or national guidelines. Furthermore, I believe there is a thicker interpretation to her statement about cuisine that applies to identity. There is so much trouble asking “what” because there is so much trouble asking “who.” Who is the Filipino today? Is it the urban Filipino born and living in Manila, Philippines? Or is it the Cebuano-speaking fisherman living on the coast of Danao? Is it the fifth generation Filipino American working as a barista in New Orleans? Or is it the “half” Romanian, “half” Filipina student curious about her culture? Joaquin might answer, it would be all of these people, if they were asking about their own identities.

As the Filipino diaspora spreads across the world, Filipino cuisine is consumed in mothers’ kitchens and in restaurants around the globe. Perhaps *haute* cuisine Filipino chefs might cringe at the idea of serving sweet spaghetti with hotdogs at a restaurant. And

perhaps Filipino mothers might be confused with placing a French-fusion *adobo* on the table next to recipes that have been in their families for generations. Yet these are foods that Filipinos eat with delight and consider an integral part of their identities. At the same time, Filipinos feel their cuisine has been overlooked or misunderstood by non-Filipinos. They feel as if there is an absence of Filipino restaurants in American dining as compared to other Asian ethnic groups. A Filipino couple serving as diplomats in Washington D.C. wrote an essay in an anthology of Filipino food suggesting, “Perhaps some savvy presentation, a little clever local adaptation, and a good business model could encourage the growth of more Pinoy restaurants abroad that will attract a broader popular clientele” (Garcia, Batoon-Garcia 2008, 15).

They make several valid statements: making the presentation of Filipino food more attractive would be helpful, as well as adapting the food to American standards and creating a better model for their business might make Filipino restaurants more acceptable to American palates. As a result, Filipino restaurants could showcase Filipino food as a product that complies with American ideals of taste.

Yet Filipino restaurants showcase Filipino identity in a way that other public performances do not. The conflicted nature of Filipino food only highlights the conflicted nature of the Filipino identity. When Filipino cuisine is introduced in a restaurant—a Westernized institution—Filipinos do not adapt it to American tastes the way other ethnic groups may have. Instead, Filipino restaurants become a reconstructed space that reflects the concept of home, including family and the homeland of the Philippines. The habitus of “being Filipino” clashes with these expectations of “being American,” and restaurants become sites of identity negotiation as well as havens of nostalgia and expression of pride. I believe these two reasons to be the main factors in Filipinos’ perceived lack of dining: their

contentious view of identity and continued comparison to other groups, which manifests itself in a contentious view of what constitutes a restaurant; and their desire to recreate home as a response to nostalgia and distance from their families, homeland, and “original” culture.

Perhaps one day Filipino food will enter mainstream American cuisine. And perhaps one day, Filipino restaurants will be as popular as Chinese buffets or fancy Thai restaurants. Should this happen, I pose these questions: in this trend of restaurants and markets, how do Filipinos look east, look west, and look inwardly in order to define their cuisine, their social space, and themselves? What will happen to *nanay's kusina* and the *carinderia*?

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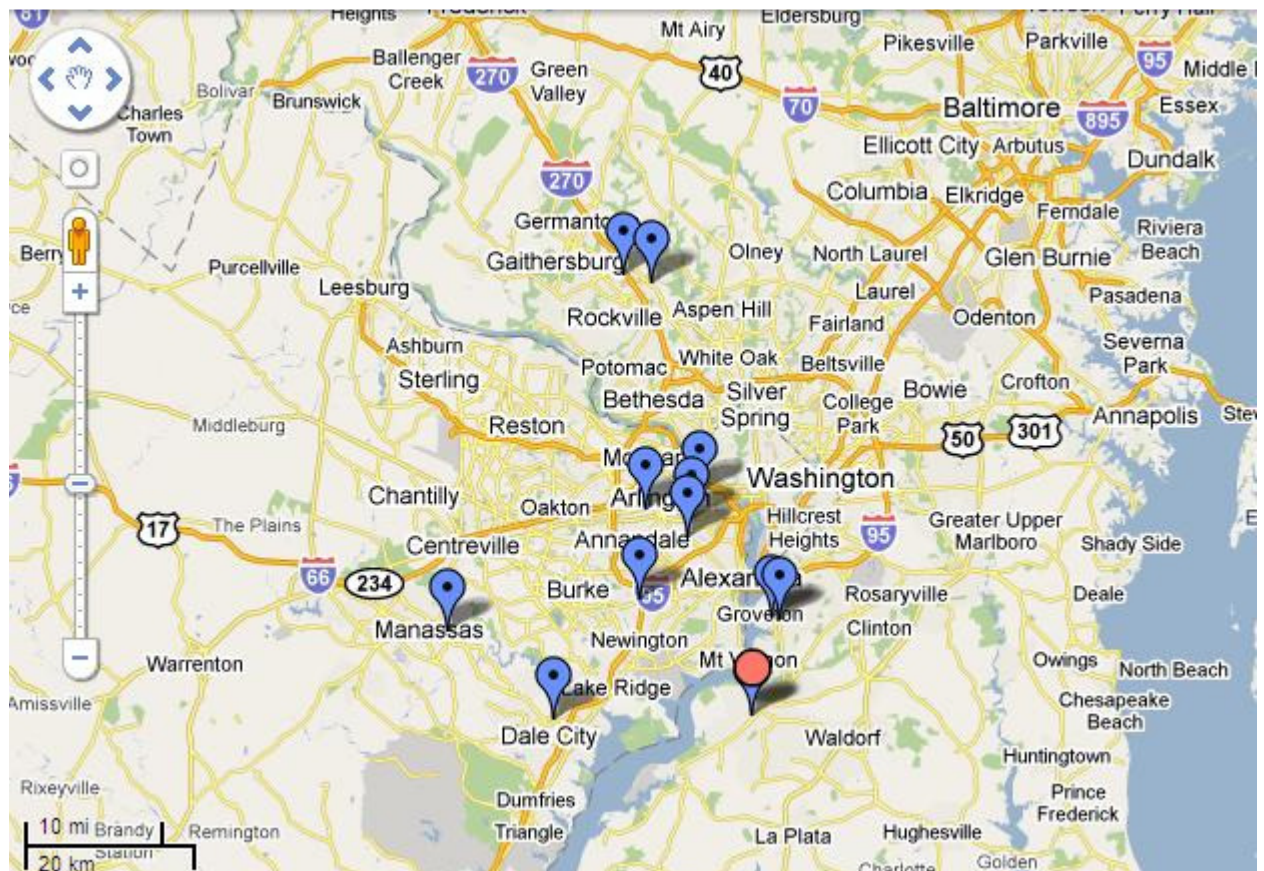
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APPENDIX I: GEOGRAPHY

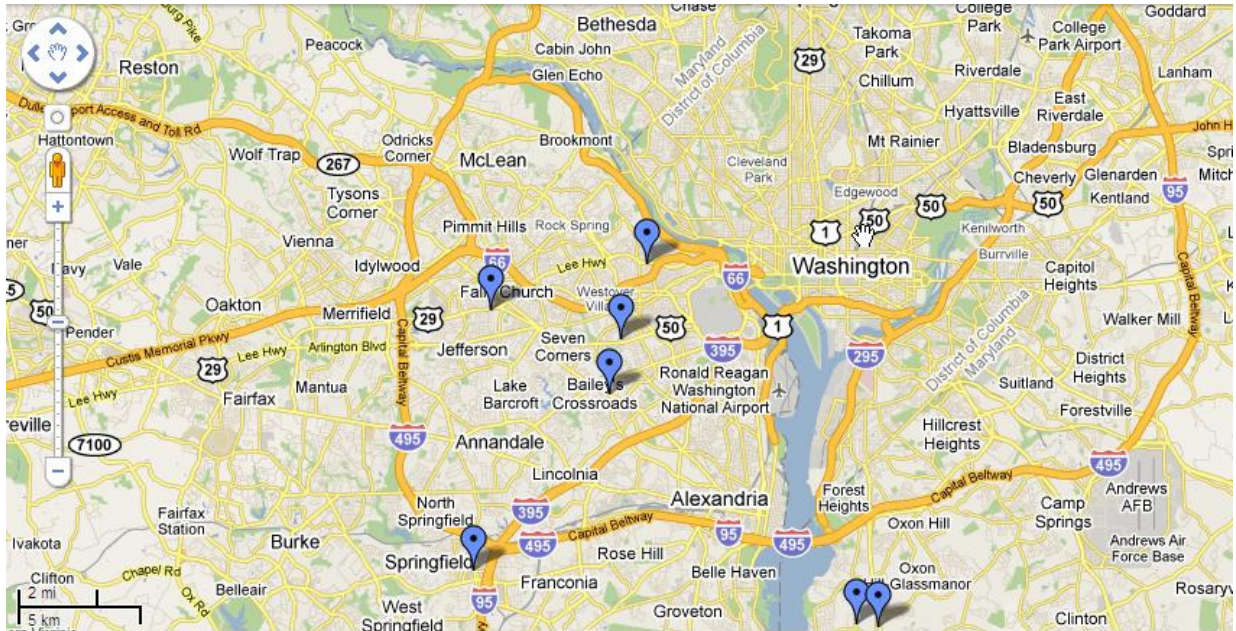
Restaurants:

Lumpia Pansit atbp – Derwood, MD
Pampanguena Café – Derwood, MD
Kabayan – Fort Washington, MD
House of Chang – Fort Washington, MD
North Star Bakery – Fort Washington, MD
Philippine Oriental Market – Arlington, VA
Little Quiapo – Arlington, VA
Karaoke Idol – Falls Church, VA
Manila Café – Springfield, VA
Pinoy Market & Café – Manassas, VA
Kababayan – Woodbridge, VA

Total view of the D.C. Metropolitan Area, screenshot from Google Maps



Closer view of the Northern Virginia restaurants, screenshot from Google Maps



APPENDIX II: PHOTOGRAPHS

The original *Smoke Resto* in Boracay, Philippines



Pampanguena Café in Derwood, Maryland.



Meal from *Pampanguena Café*. Rice, stick of BBQ pork, and *laing* on a styrofoam plate, accompanied by a cup of *tinola* broth.



Adobo from *Lumpia Pansit atbp* in Derwood, MD.



Kababayan in Woodbridge, VA.



Inside view of *Little Quiapo* in Arlington, Virginia.



GLOSSARY

All terms from A Quick Guide to Filipino Food & Cooking by Cris C. Abiva, unless specified otherwise. * denotes a definition contributed by Amanda L. Andrei.

Adobo – one of the most popular dishes in the Philippines. Meat, poultry, seafood or vegetables cooked in vinegar, garlic, bay leaf, salt and peppercorn with or without sauce. Adobo has various variations. Manila *adobo* is saucy, Cavite *adobo* has mashed liver, Batangas *adobo* is reddish because of *achuete*, Bicolano *adobo* has coconut milk, Laguna *adobo* uses tumeric while Zamboanga *adobo* is thick with coconut cream.

***Ampalaya** – a vegetable resembling the shape and size of a cucumber, with a light green, waxy, bumpy rind. Often a hallmark in Ilocano cooking and a common ingredient in *pinakbet*.

***Ate** – Derived from a Chinese honorific, meaning “older sister” in Tagalog but can also be applied to cousins and female workers such as waitresses, stewardesses, street vendors, and guards. Ilocano term is *manang*.

Baboy – refers to pig or its meat (pork)

Bagoong – a condiment made from shrimps or fish that is salted and fermented. Also *bugoong* or *bogoong*.

***Bicol Express** – [Bicolano] pork, beef, or chicken cooked in coconut cream and chilies

Brazo de Mercedes – meringue roll filled with thick custard and dusted with confectioners’ sugar

***Carinderia** – refers to a small restaurant, not unlike a canteen, which is usually casual and integrates a *turo-turo*.

Chicharon bulaklak – crackling made from a length of pork intestines cut crosswise. When deep-fried they open up and look like wood roses.

Dinuguan – pork, beef or chicken and innards stewed in fresh blood seasoned with oregano, garlic, onions and vinegar. It is often eaten with *putong puti*, a steamed rice cake.

***Dulang** – low table

***Guisado** – technique of sautéing with garlic, onions, and tomatoes. Also known as *ginisa*.

***Jeepney** – a hollowed out WWII truck that is painted with vivid, colorful depictions of anything from saints to cartoon characters. Found throughout the Philippines, it is the local mode of transportation for natives or the daring.

***Kabababayan** – fellow countryman

***Kalesa** – traditional Spanish horse-drawn carriage, still found in the old walled city of Intramuros, but more as a tourist attraction than a mode of transportation (much like the carriages in Colonial Williamsburg)

***Kusina** – Spanish-influenced word for kitchen

***Kuya** – derived from a Chinese honorific meaning “older brother” in Tagalog but can also be applied to cousins and male workers such as waiters, taxi-drivers, jeepney drivers, street vendors, and guards. Ilocano term is *manong*.

Laing – generic term for taro (*gabi*) leaves cooked in *gata*. This method of cooking is predominant in Southern Luzon.

***Lola** – Spanish-influenced term meaning grandmother

***Lolo** – Spanish-influenced term meaning grandfather

Longaniza – native sausage made with minced meat, diced pork fat and spices. This mixture is stuffed into fresh or synthetic casings then tied with string. The sausages are cured then hung to dry.

Lumpia – generic name for spring roll

Manok – chicken

Menudo – stew of diced pork and liver with potatoes, tomatoes, and bell pepper. Tripe, chorizo and garbonzos can also be added.

***Mestizo/a** – a person of mixed heritage, originally referred to mixed Spanish and indigenous Filipino heritage

***Nanay** – mother

Paksiw (na isda) – fish cooked in vinegar, ginger, garlic, peppercorn and a little water, sometimes with *ampalaya* and eggplant

Pancit – generic name for noodle dish. It can either be dry, meaning sautéed (*pancit guisado*), or wet meaning with broth (*pancit na may sabaw*)

***Papaitan** – goat, beef, or pork stewed with the bitter juice (bile) from the digestive tract of grass-eating animals like the cow, goat, and carabao

***Pata** – fried pork skin

Patis – a salty, amber-colored thin fish sauce used to season dishes or as a dipping sauce. It is similar to the Indonesian *petis*, Vietnamese *nuoc mam* and Thai *nampla*

Puto – generic term for steamed rice cakes. There are two basic types, the light and fluffy *puto* and the sticky and heavy *puto*. Light and fluffy *puto* include *putong puti*, *putong pula*, *puto Binan*, *putong Manapla* and *putong Polo*. Sticky and heavy types include *puto bumbong* and *putomaya*.

Relleno – stuffed beef, chicken, fish, crab or vegetables cooked by braising, roasting, frying or steaming

Siao pao (sio pao) – Chinese white, round steamed filled buns. *Siopao asado* has a filling of sweet pork while *siopao bola-bola* is filled with a meatball and a slice of salted egg. Fried *siopao* is the steamed bun pan-fried in oil until lightly browned.

Sinigang – soup dish of fish, meat or prawns cooked with a souring agent (e.g. tamarind, *kamayas*, *batuan*, green mango, green pineapple)

Sisig – [Pampanga] specialty dish using pork cheeks, head meat and liver broiled, diced then sautéed and served sizzling

Tinola – soup dish of chicken, ginger, green *papaya* or *upo* and *sili* leaves

***Tita** – Aunt, can also be used for the parents of friends

***Tito** – Uncle, can also be used for the parents of friends

***Turo-turo** – literally meaning “point-point,” refers to a set-up of food where the server and the food are on one side of the table and the customer is on the other. Food is often prepared in bulk early that day and is placed in containers such as aluminum trays. The food and customer are usually separated by a glass counter, and the customer points to the food he or she wants. The server places the food on the plate and may hand it to the customer, who rings it up at the cashier.